

VZCZCXRO4266

PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK  
DE RUEHLB #2322/01 1911457

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 101457Z JUL 06

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4536  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0627  
RHMFIS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHMFIS/COMSOCENT MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 002322

SIPDIS

NOFORN  
SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/SINGH/HARDING  
LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/10/2016

TAGS: PGOV PTER KISL KDEM ASEC MCAP LE SY IZ

SUBJECT: MGLE01: JA'JA' SAYS FEAR OF SECTARIAN CLASHES IS  
MODERATING HIZBALLAH

BEIRUT 00002322 001.2 OF 004

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)  
)

SUMMARY

1 (C/NF) According to Lebanese Forces leader Samir Ja'ja', intense concern over potential Sunni-Shiite violence is acting as a political restraint on Hizballah, and usefully serving to promote cooperating between Lebanon's various security services and sectarian communities. Furthermore, Hizballah is so troubled by Syrian-backed Sunni militant attacks on Shiite civilians in Iraq that its leadership is re-evaluating its strategic relationship with the SARG. Meanwhile, Michel Aoun, oblivious that he is considered a lightweight and junior partner by Hizballah, is focusing all his energy on blocking the formation of the Constitutional Court, a final gambit to secure his chances of winning the presidency. Ja'ja' believes that many of Aoun's recent political gestures have been part of an ongoing attempt to court favor with Damascus. Ja'ja' also confided to the Ambassador that, in an attempt to break Lebanon's political deadlock, he is working on a plan with Sa'ad Hariri to replace Michel Suleiman as commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). (Presumably, Suleiman's replacement would facilitate the removal of President Lahoud from the Baabda Palace.) Ja'ja' criticized Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government and the "March 14" alliance as lacking decisiveness and coordination. He did express his support for the draft electoral law, however, and said that he was working with other "March 14" leaders to study the law and come out with a unified platform regarding electoral reform. Unprompted by the Ambassador, Ja'ja' added that he thought IFES technical support would be useful in this regard. End summary.

SECTARIAN TENSIONS PRODUCE CALM

12. (C) On July 8, the Ambassador and emboff called on Lebanese Forces leader Samir Ja'ja' at his redoubt high in the northern reaches of Mount Lebanon, near the ancient stand of cedar trees known as the "Cedars of God." Ja'ja' began the two-hour meeting by discussing the current security situation, focusing especially on Hizballah and the dual effects of ongoing Shiite-Sunni tensions. Ja'ja' explained

that Hizballah, along with the rest of Lebanon, is terrified of al-Qa'ida-style Sunni militant attacks in Lebanon, fearful that they will initiate a series of Shiite reprisals that will quickly escalate out of control. "Let me tell you how it will go. One of these groups, Asbat al-Ansar, will hit Hizballah. The Shiites will hit back. And from there it will go crazy. No one will be able to control it." Ja'ja' explained that the ongoing terror attacks in Iraq are the primary source of Lebanon's fear of Sunni-Shiite violence within its own communities. "This is all about Iraq. They are terrified it will happen here."

¶13. (C) Therefore, in an attempt to lower political tensions, Ja'ja' said that Hizballah is now taking a more moderate political line. It has even, for the time being, forsworn any Blue Line operations. He pointed to recent Hizballah statements in support of the government, and their mere token, low-level participation in Aounist-led demonstrations against the Constitutional Council.

¶14. (C) Ja'ja' added that Sa'ad Hariri and his predominantly Sunni Future Current supporters are equally worried about Sunni extremists. They are also trying to play down tensions. The most amazing thing, said Ja'ja', is that the intense concern about the possibility of Sunni-Shiite violence has prompted unprecedented levels of cooperation between Lebanese security services, including the LAF, Internal Security Force (ISF), and Surete General (SG). In Lebanon's confessional system, each service is associated with one sectarian community or another -- Christian, Sunni, or Shia. Improved coordination among them is a noteworthy event. "It's ironic," Ja'ja' said, "that the tensions bring us together like this. It's useful in a way."

#### HIZBALLAH AND DAMASCUS

---

BEIRUT 00002322 002.2 OF 004

¶15. (C) According to Ja'ja', Hizballah was deeply shaken recently when it discovered that three Palestinian militants from the Ain el Hilweh refugee camp -- whose transport to Iraq Hizballah facilitated under Syrian coordination -- were killed carrying out suicide operations against Shiite Iraqi civilians. "Hizballah is vexed and sad. Very sad," Ja'ja' explained. This revelation has affected Hizballah's leadership so deeply that they are re-evaluating their relationship with Damascus. "Hizballah knows the Syrians are supporting these attacks in Iraq, and they are starting to distance themselves from Syria." For now, Ja'ja' added, Hizballah is for stability, and Syria is not. Ja'ja' warned, "Syria will work with its other allies, from Ahmed Jabril to Sleiman Franjieh, to cause chaos in Lebanon."

#### HIZBALLAH AND TEHRAN

---

¶16. (C) The Ambassador asked if Ja'ja' believed that Hizballah was re-evaluating its relationship with Iran as well. Ja'ja' said they were still close, and that Tehran, not Damascus, remains Hizballah's primary partner. At the same time, however, he said that fear of an eruption of sectarian clashes in Lebanon has focused Hizballah on the need to put Lebanon first. Hizballah actually has quite a bit of independence on strategic policy from Tehran, despite the hundreds of millions of dollars they receive in assistance every year. The Ambassador then asked what Ja'ja' thought Hizballah's response would be if the nuclear situation with Iran worsened. Ja'ja' thought for a moment, and then said that, in the case of limited western strikes in Iran, Hizballah would show restraint. "Three months ago, I would not have hesitated to say that they would attack Israel and drag Lebanon into war. Now, I don't know. I think they would be quiet."

¶17. (C) Ja'ja' did point out, however, that these are small

steps and minor concessions on Hizballah's part. Hizballah would lower its rhetoric, and possibly work with the government on Palestinian disarmament, but no one should suspect cooperation from Hizballah on major issues like its Iranian funding and its own eventual disarmament. "Maybe (they will disarm) in a few years, after this crisis with Iran and the international community has passed, and Iran is the loser," Ja'ja' said.

AOUN'S BAABDA GAMBIT

---

¶ 8. (C) The conversation soon turned to Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun and his alliance with Hizballah. Ja'ja' said that Aoun was definitely the junior partner in his relationship with Hizballah, but that his "psychic constitution" will never let him recognize that, or recognize the odds against his winning the presidency. Ja'ja' described Aoun as the only major Lebanese political leader moving against the current stream of public moderation and discretion. At a time when even Hizballah is seeking to keep the South quiet and is refraining from criticism of the government, Aoun is still calling for the government's downfall. "Even Hizballah won't join him," Ja'ja' said, describing how, during a recent FPM-orchestrated protest against the new Constitutional Court, Hizballah showed only token participation. The real sign, according to Ja'ja', was Hizballah's agreement with Sa'ad Hariri on a "Lebanese Unity League." "They picked Sa'ad over him (Aoun). Aoun was furious. But what can he do?"

¶ 9. (C) What he thinks he can do, Ja'ja' explained, is to block the formation of the new Constitutional Court as his last and final chance at the presidency. It has nothing to do with the contested 2005 parliamentary elections, Ja'ja' explained; "this is for the presidency." Ja'ja' said that, with only 18 months until new presidential elections, the current Parliament, with its Hariri-led majority, will decide the presidency. Historically, Parliament has agreed on the necessity of a two-thirds quorum to hold presidential elections. This has been in effect a "gentleman's agreement," however, exceeding the constitutional requirement of a simple majority. "March 14 will really only need 65 votes to keep (Aoun) out of Baabda. He won't have a chance."

BEIRUT 00002322 003.2 OF 004

Because the Constitutional Court validates all parliamentary and presidential elections, Aoun wants to block its formation in order to prevent any election that would not go in his favor. His only hope, Ja'ja' continued, is the requirement of a two-thirds majority for presidential elections as his price for accepting the new council.

¶ 10. (C) The Ambassador then mentioned that, when he had called on Aoun earlier in the week, Aoun had made sure that no media were present for the meeting, a highly unusual move from someone as publicity-conscious as Aoun. The Ambassador asked Ja'ja' from whom Aoun may have been trying to hide the meeting. Ja'ja' thought for several seconds, then firmly replied, "Syria." He described a string of recent events, from Aoun's agreement with Hizballah to his calls against Siniora's government, as part of an ongoing campaign by Aoun to court Syria's favor. Aoun was becoming jealous of Suleiman Franjeh as Syria's "man in Lebanon," and would start making more dramatic gestures of his own to ensure Syria's attention and support, Ja'ja' predicted.

JA'JA'S BAABDA GAMBIT

---

¶ 11. (C/NF) Then, Ja'ja' leaned towards the Ambassador, and lowering his voice, said he wanted to tell him something in utmost discretion. He claimed to be working with Sa'ad Hariri on a plan "to revive Lebanon from her torpor." According to Ja'ja', he and Hariri are looking at a "constitutional mechanism" to force the replacement of LAF

Commander Michel Suleiman. Ja'ja' described Suleiman as the lynchpin that keeps President Lahoud in the Baabda Palace. Remove Suleiman, Ja'ja' suggested, and you remove Lahoud. Ja'ja' explained that the LAF commander supervises the President's Republican Guard. Ja'ja' said they would select a replacement for Suleiman who would instruct the President's very own guards to remove him from office. The Ambassador reminded Ja'ja' that, given his own history, he should be extremely careful even considering such a plan.

A COORDINATED PLATFORM FOR MARCH 14,  
INCLUDING ELECTORAL REFORM

---

¶12. (C) Turning his attention back to mainstream political activity, Ja'ja' said he blamed Prime Minister Siniora and his fellow "March 14" politicians for failing to take decisive political action or to coordinate their own political activity. Against Aoun's well-oiled political machine, the "March 14" group has lost considerable political ground through organizational and strategic weaknesses. While the prime minister has a number of worthy goals, he lacks the strong will and decisiveness necessary to achieve them, especially given the contentious climate of Lebanese politics. "Look at (Siniora's) cabinet. It's a bunch of technocrats: Jihad Azour, Sami Haddad. He needs more politicians, people who actually know how to get things done," Ja'ja' said.

¶13. (C) Ja'ja' did say, however, that "March 14" is looking at the Boutros Commission's draft electoral law, and that they hope to come out with a unified platform on electoral reform "in about two weeks." Jumblatt and Hariri still have reservations about the proportional elements, Ja'ja' explained, but he expected that "March 14" would endorse most of the electoral package. In the meantime, they may benefit from assistance in understanding some of the more technical aspects of the law. The Ambassador mentioned that the Embassy had provided some research assistance to the electoral commission. "Yes, IFES," Ja'ja' grinned, adding that IFES's technical expertise would be useful for Lebanon's political leaders as they study the complicated draft law.

REBUILDING THE LEBANESE FORCES

---

¶14. (C) The Ambassador then inquired into the legal status of the Lebanese Forces. Ja'ja' replied that they were now a legal political party, officially called the Party of the Lebanese Forces. However, after the Lebanese Forces were disbanded and Ja'ja' imprisoned in the 1990s, their organizational structure and financial resources severely

BEIRUT 00002322 004.2 OF 004

atrophied. Ja'ja' explained that, as part of an attempt to build the party's financial base, they were investing in logistics and construction companies, and hoped to develop business contracts in Iraq.

¶15. (C) As for the formerly Lebanese Forces-run television station, the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), Ja'ja' said that he is still involved in an ownership dispute with LBC's director, Pierre Daher. Fifty-four percent of Ja'ja's own controlling interest was transferred to Daher when he was arrested, Ja'ja' explained. Former Deputy Prime Minister Isaam Fares owns another 20 percent. Ja'ja' said he is now involved in a battle not only to re-assert control of LBC, but also to control its news content. Ja'ja' blamed Daher for "too much" coverage of Aoun and Franjieh, and said he was looking forward to the return of news anchor May Chidiac, who has been recovering in France from injuries sustained in a September 2005 assassination attempt. Chidiac would be able to return to broadcasting within a month. "May is on our side, and Pierre won't be able to stop her," Ja'ja' said.

COMMENT

-----

¶16. (C/NF) Ja'ja' has joined a chorus of Embassy contacts who are starting to argue that Lebanon's Sunni-Shia tensions -- up to a point -- can be useful in encouraging restraint. But Ja'ja' goes further than most, in arguing that Hizballah is now reevaluating its relationship with Damascus because of the latter's support of anti-Shia violence in Iraq. In essence, Ja'ja' says, Hizballah is cooling to Damascus, while Aoun is moving closer to the Syrians. We'll keep Ja'ja's theory in mind, but we're skeptical that Hizballah is ready to move away from Damascus. As for Ja'ja's hope for removing LAF Commander Suleiman, we counsel caution. Suleiman is fence-sitting now. If he gets wind that Ja'ja' and Hariri are plotting against him, he might try to turn the LAF against the March 14 movement. And, even if it is possible and desirable to remove Suleiman now, Ja'ja' shouldn't be involved: having been notorious for execution-style murders of LAF officers during Lebanon's civil war, Ja'ja', along with any plot traced to him, would not garner the support of the LAF officer corps.

FELTMAN